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THE SCENTS OF EDEN



A History of the Spice Trade

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Chapter 1

"WHOEVER IS LORD OF MALACCA . . ."

EUROPEAN COLONIZATION OF the Far East began in July of 1511 when a Portuguese fleet, commanded by Afonso de Albuquerque and including a young captain named Fernão de Magalhães, rode at anchor just off the strategic port of Malacca's deepwater channel, within sight of the river bisecting the city and the sultan's palace on the fortified port's highest hill.

Malacca is tucked away on the southwestern coast of the Malay Peninsula in the narrowest part of the straits separating the mainland from the island of Sumatra. Today this ancient port city, lying midway between the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore, is a neglected terminus—a seaside pastel of narrow streets and old ruins whitened by the sun, a detour for the curious traveler. But at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Malacca was fabled and golden: one of the most important destinations on earth. Malacca was the most prized port along the legendary spice route that stretched from the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, in the East across Asia to the West. As the major entrepôt trading center in Asia, the riches of the Orient—especially spices—passed through the city on their way to an expectant Europe, a trade for centuries controlled by Arab and Chinese merchants.

That summer day the ships rode in place under a monsoon their sailors knew well, for it had raged at the flotilla as it sailed east from India. At

northern Sumatra the Europeans had managed not only to secure provisions, but also to commandeer a few junks. Now the winds funneled up the straits, boiling the seas under the strained anchor ropes and tearing at the furlled sails—dull gray for the European ships and bright red, green, and yellow for the junks.

The Portuguese were intent on seizing control of the spice trade, but to do so required the siege and capture of Malacca, for the fortress-port guarded the bottleneck between the Indian Ocean, the Java Sea, and the South China Sea, and hence monopolized mercantile activities in this part of the world. The deepwater channel separating the mainland from Sumatra passed close to the city, and merchant dhows riding the seasonal monsoons from Arabia and India called here, as did junks from China. Likewise, *lanchara*, the small single-sailed, square-rigged vessels from the islands to the east of Java, were familiar sights in the harbor.

An early-sixteenth-century visitor put a fine point on the city's importance. "No trading port as large as Malacca is known, nor anywhere else do they deal in such fine and highly priced merchandise. Goods from all over the world are sold here. It is at the end of monsoons when you find what you want, and sometimes more than what you are looking for."

Urged on by the dictum "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice," the Portuguese, with no fond memories of the Moors' three-hundred-year occupation of Iberia, were primed for invasion in July 1511.

Since the year 1000 the Venetian fleet had controlled the Asiatic scene, dominating the route to the Holy Land and the Far East, and by the 1400s Venetian ships were returning from the East loaded with its most precious cargo, spices. Venice in its prime was extravagantly rich, much as Amsterdam would become in the seventeenth century. Its spirit of taste and adventure may be perceived in a single individual of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo (1254–1324).

The pen of this Venetian merchant yielded one of the world's most important and timely books, *The Adventures of Marco Polo*, while Polo suffered captivity as a Genoese prisoner of war. With the enforced leisure to chronicle his travels, which began in 1271, Polo in his narrative awakened Europe's interest in the Far East. Though many of his contemporaries—unwilling to believe that Asia was in many ways ahead of the West

in matters economic, cultural, and technical—branded Polo as a boaster and liar, his narrative had a profound influence in exciting the European imagination and giving shape to the way the Western mind began to perceive Asia.

Alexandre Dumas later wrote of Venice in *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*: "The intellectual faculties seem to have soared in an enduring exaltation under the influence of spices. Is it to spices that we owe Titian's masterpieces? I am tempted to believe it." Therefore, it did not augur well for Venice when Portuguese mariners in the wake of Vasco da Gama waded ashore in India with the cry "For Christ and spices!" In the city of St. Mark, Girolamo Priuli noted in his journal in July 1501 that the loss of the spice trade "would be like the loss of milk to a newborn babe."

Fernão de Magalhães (who would later take the *nom de guerre* Fernando de Magallanes, which in turn would become anglicized to Ferdinand Magellan) and his friend Francisco Serrão were both in their early thirties, Magellan older by two years. Though neither was famous, their lives were to become curiously intertwined and lead a decade later to Magellan's leadership of the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe in his search for the Spice Islands. But there was little in the summer of 1511 to suggest that such a feat was even a remote possibility.

Born in northwestern Portugal of provincial nobility, the young men served in 1495 as court pages in Lisbon. It was the eve of Vasco da Gama's expedition around southern Africa's Cape of Good Hope to reach India, and the palace talked of little else than overseas conquests. Caught up in the brash times, the two had embarked by 1505 on a campaign several years long in the Indian Ocean, when the Portuguese sought military and, more important, mercantile supremacy over the hated Venetians. Venice, with the combined forces of Egypt and India, had secured a monopoly on Europe's trade, and Portugal was keen to see it ended. It signaled a bloody period.

Magellan, not a tall man, had the stocky build of a wrestler and carried a large, square head with a high, strong nose, his prominent features framed by a black beard giving off an air of unrelenting intensity. No less determined was the younger Serrão, who cut a more poetic figure in his suit of armor than his friend's prosaic one. Magellan had saved Serrão's life more than once, as Serrão had Magellan's, each earning scars in battle.

In the midsummer of 1511, as the Portuguese awaited the signal for the offensive, the two men—now bachelor officers in their prime—were hardened, cocksure veterans of the wars.

The soldiers and sailors of the expedition were dirty and stank from weeks of crowded living aboard the sixty-ton caravels, which forced on the men a diet of bitter wine, hard bread, and salt meat: staples of the adventurer's life. Rations, however, were not always so mean. Though the scarcity of fruit and vegetables on long voyages inevitably raised the specter of scurvy, the Portuguese did discover a plentiful source of protein in the meat of green sea turtles. These docile creatures were especially vulnerable on tropical moonlit beaches when they emerged from the surf to lay their eggs, only to be seized by human predators. Flung on their backs in the watery holds of caravels to flail helplessly in the swill for days and weeks, they were slaughtered one by one to feed hungry seamen. But turtles were not always to be found, and a steady diet of barely edible victuals had been forced on these men in a confined space not much larger than a modern school bus.

By contrast, some of the Chinese vessels that called at Malacca were floating cities, with room for as many as four hundred men, women, and children, as well as onboard fruit and vegetable gardens. There were even larger Malay ships called *jongs*, twice the height of Portuguese ships; these rode low in the water and sailed slowly and awkwardly when carrying a full cargo of a thousand tons and a thousand men.

Since its founding, Malacca had been impregnable to siege, and many believed it to be unassailable. There were four gates in the surrounding city wall, each with a watch and drum tower. Inside the walls was a second, smaller enclosure of palisades where individual godowns on the river housed wares for trade. Malacca's defenses were not readily seen from the sea, for good reason. The fortress-port was a warren of confused levels and narrow streets that descended to the protected harbor at the mouth of the river. A crucial tactical consideration was the river itself, for it divided the city, which clung to the estuary like seaweed to rock.

Serrão and Magellan were no strangers to Malacca. Two years before, they had tasted the city's wealth in an expedition that ended in disaster, nearly costing them their lives. In September of 1509 Diogo Lopes de Sequeira carried orders from Portugal's King Manuel to reconnoiter the

fabled port and establish a base there from which to reach the Spice Islands. Magellan and Serrão, eager for adventure and riches, signed onto the voyage in Cochín, on the subcontinent. The small group got under way, a force of seventy men driven by high-handedness and greed and possessed of a near-total ignorance of the world they were about to confront.

When the Portuguese anchored off the fortified city and came ashore in longboats, they were greeted by vast, enthusiastic crowds of Malays. "These are white Bengalis," the natives said to each other in wonder as they surrounded the visitors, some pulling their beards and patting their heads while others seized the hats or clasped the hands of the newcomers. At first Malacca's sultan, Mahmud Shah, received the strange, ragtag visitors cautiously, and after signing a peace treaty on the third day, Sequeira immediately traded for spices to fill his ships. It was the commander's intention to ride the seasonal winds back to India before they shifted.

Despite warnings by Chinese merchants and a Persian woman who had taken one of the "white Bengalis" as a lover, the Portuguese were seemingly oblivious to a treacherous plot that was being urged on the royal house by rival Arab traders. This was a desperate card played by the Muslim merchants, who resented the interlopers as Christians, but more so as their competitors in trade. In this regard, the Ming merchants, Chinese, were neutral, unless they had intermarried with the Malays, in which case they were forced to convert to Islam, thereby siding with the Arabs.

To the Malaccans, business as usual generally precluded bald betrayal of a potential trading partner. But there were unique forces at work in this encounter between two such vastly disparate peoples. Among them was the issue of two antagonistic faiths confronting each other. The newly arrived, infidel Portuguese were of a culture that had waged war against Islam for the duration of the Crusades. Then there was the question of protocol. Especially galling to Malacca's court was Portuguese ignorance of palace etiquette, for the visitors had no sense of the homage due a head of state and his prime minister.

During an audience with the sultan, one of the outlanders, Jeronimo Texeira, addressed the ruler in a loud, rude voice and in a tone familiar and demanding. It was a devastating breach of courtesy, and it became clear to the Malaccans that such boorishness should reap no reward. Then Sequeira himself attempted with his left hand—the one Muslims used for cleansing

oneself, thus rendering the member unclean—to hang a gold chain around the neck of the prime minister, whose name was Tun Mutahir. Though the court was visibly angry, the sultan calmed his attendants, saying, "Leave the men alone; they know no better." But the affronts festered in the royal house, which waited for a propitious moment to strike. It came the following day.

The sultan sent a messenger to inform Sequeira that large quantities of pepper and other goods had been collected for his fleet and that he had only to send his boats and men ashore to load them. When the unsuspecting Portuguese commander split his forces between the four ships and the shore where his men were collecting spices in bulk from a warehouse on the river, the Malays attacked the shore party, cutting the men off from the longboats at the beach. Simultaneously, the Malay prahus approached the anchored caravels as if to trade, virtually surrounding the ships. With a hundred men ashore, the caravels were now lightly defended, and the remaining crew members were oblivious to what was occurring onshore as the Malays scampered aboard.

In the commander's cabin high over the square stern, Magellan discovered a half-naked Sequeira entertaining a Malaccan trader over a chessboard, surrounded by a roomful of armed Malays, and he warned Sequeira of what might be happening. Historians have roundly criticized Sequeira's credulity. Damião de Góis writes that the commander behaved "as if he were in the port of Lisbon." A lookout spotted smoke ashore and then watched in horror as a mob intercepted the Portuguese as they made their way to the beach and their longboats.

Serrão, commanding one of the loading parties, was among them, and with his men tried to slash his way through the frenzied Malays swarming the beach. The captain's pointed, high-combed helmet and metal breastplate were a prize for his attackers, and the hapless Serrão would have been killed had Magellan and two companions on shipboard not seized a skiff and paddled furiously to the beach to counterattack, allowing Serrão's group to reach a longboat, which they retook with their swords. The outnumbered Portuguese fought their way through the surf, greeted by arrows and shrieks from enemy prahus, as they rowed back to the ships, leaving behind sixty men dead or captured.

Sequeira waited a day before weighing anchor, hoping to ransom his

men held by the Malays, but it was a vain hope. Determined, however, not to allow the sultan's treachery to go unpunished, he executed two captives he held aboard by having a crossbowman put an arrow through their brains, after which he deposited the bodies ashore with a message pinned to their bodies: "Thus the king of Portugal avenged the treason of his enemies."

Portugal's first dream of establishing a post at Malacca in 1509 ended in defeat and humiliation, and the expedition began the slow voyage back to India seething with the instincts of pirates. Life to these Portuguese was fierce, savage, and uncertain; it was the vast gamble that had brought them here. As consolation for the Malaccan failure, they attacked a merchant transport in the Andaman Sea, but even their attempts at piracy backfired. The crew of the junk put up a good fight, beating off the Portuguese, and then in retaliation swarmed aboard Serrão's caravel and pinned him against the mast. Again, Magellan's sword saved his friend from certain death as he and his men repelled the counterattackers. The Europeans sailed onward and as a balm to their woes took another, less resistant junk.

AS CITIES GO, Malacca was not an ancient place. Barely more than a century old, this maritime kingdom was established in 1402 by Prince Paramesvara, a fugitive driven out of southern Sumatra's Sriwijaya kingdom (today Palembang) by the powerful Majapahit rulers of East Java. Its founding is shrouded in Malay legend. The prince had been hunting in an area just out of sight of the Sumatran coast on a site known as Water Island. He was resting under a tree when one of his hounds was kicked by a white mouse-deer, sending the dog into the river.

"This is a good place," said Paramesvara, according to Malay annals. "Even its mouse-deer are full of fight! We shall do well to make a city here."

The prince ordered that a city be made, asking as he rose from his place of rest, "What is the name of this tree under which I am standing?"

"It is called *malaka*, Your Highness," his courtiers answered.

"Then Malaka shall be the name of this city," he is said to have declared, and his followers set to work laying out a settlement of wide streets lined with raised houses of split coconut palms and thatched roofs

beside the river. The images of a malacca tree and a startled deer soon adorned the new settlement's coat of arms.

As the new city-state grew, it prospered. Settlers came from Java, Sumatra, Siam. Soon Malacca gained control over the straits, making Paramesvara heir to the maritime influence and power earlier enjoyed by the Sumatran kingdoms. In due time the visitation of ships from China and India were enhancing its reputation as an important trading port. And with such features as the commanding hill where the sultan's palace stood (it would become the site of St. Paul's Church in Christian times) and the sinuous river surrounded by jungle, the city was easy to defend.

Superstition as well as fortification protected Malacca. Estuarine crocodiles, believed to be dragons by Chinese traders, lurked in the coastal waters, as did tigers in the forested hills behind the port, both predators believed by Malacca's citizens to be capable of assuming human form and entering the city.

As early as 1403 the Chinese emperor sent the eunuch admiral Yin Ch'ing as envoy to this new country with presents of silks woven with golden flowers. Yin Ch'ing spoke to Paramesvara of the power and rank of China. Siam, which had claimed dominion over the peninsula, was a constant threat to overrun Paramesvara's kingdom, so the prince quickly sought protection from the imperial envoy. Other visits followed. Then the Ming court received Paramesvara in 1411, when the upstart mercantilist arrived with an entourage of 540 persons. The prince himself was received by the emperor, then lodged in the building of the Board of Rites, where he received lavish gifts and daily provisions of bullocks, goats, and wine from the imperial buttery.

When the visitors were prepared to leave, more gifts marked their departure. The emperor personally passed to Paramesvara a girdle with precious stones, horses with saddles, a hundred ounces of gold, five hundred ounces of silver, 400,000 koan in paper money, 2,600 strings of cop-per cash, three hundred pieces of silk gauze, a thousand pieces of plain silk, and two pieces of silk with golden flowers. Paramesvara returned home freed of the Siamese yoke, and Malacca grew overnight into the most important port in the East.

A generation later, following his conversion to Islam and his marriage to a north Sumatran princess, the second king of Malacca took the name

Iskander Shah, and the port became a center for the diffusion of Islam throughout Southeast Asia and the Malay Archipelago.

By 1477, just seventy-five years after Paramesvara established his kingdom, Malacca (contrary to the legend, the name is actually derived from the Arabic word *malakat*, meaning "market") had become the talk of Europe, while its court intrigues—marriages, divorces, murders—rivalled any in Renaissance Italy. Hindu Indian merchants arrived and settled, bringing with them theology and scholarship to adorn lustful lives at an ambitious court obsessed with war and women. A favorite tale at the court was the saga of Alexander the Great, which had arrived with Islam. Soon the Javanese quarter brought such Hindu artistry as the shadow play. Chinese traders imported Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Islam introduced a new rhythm to court life, while a succession of Malacca's sultans willingly sat at the feet of India's missionaries and absorbed the mystical doctrines of the subcontinent.

From the city's bazaars ships carried off rich cargoes of sandalwood seed, pearls, porcelain, white silk, gold, tin, and the sought-after bird of paradise feathers that found their way to Malacca from the remote islands near New Guinea. But the most coveted treasures that passed through this great emporium were spices—cloves, mace, nutmeg—from the islands known as the Moluccas. With trade came growth, and Malacca's faith became the mosque wedded to the marketplace.

As befits a storied kingdom, Malacca's past evolved into a mingling of fact and myth. One fable told of a foreign sultan's miraculous courtship of Malacca's fairy princess, whose haunted domain was the nearby mountain known as Gunung Ledang. The princess demanded a dowry of seven trays of mosquitoes' hearts, seven trays of mites' hearts, a vat of juice from sapless young areca palms, and a cup of the sultan's blood and another of his son's.

At the time of the impending Portuguese invasion in July 1511, Malacca was still ruled by the autocratic Mahmud Shah, who had absolute power over life and death within his empire, a role now deeply rooted in a century's tradition. The sultan imposed on his domain an astonishing tapestry of ritual, orchestrated down to the smallest detail. In his excursions within the city, he dressed in ceremonial costume, a black velvet suit with gold and silver braiding and buttons with a red sash. Carrying the royal white umbrella, he was "borne about on high," on the back of an ele-

phant or the shoulders of a slave or in a litter. Heading the procession was a band: drums, fifes, gongs, and a silver trumpet mimicking a dragon's call.

There were secret, forbidden quarters of the magnificently gabled palace where brides of many races lived for the royal pleasure. Malay records provide vivid accounts of the sultan's harem. "He took all the beautiful daughters of the Parsee merchants and Klings who pleased him to be his concubines, made them turn Moors when he had to give them in marriage and he married them to mandarins' sons and gave them dowries, and this custom of marrying people of different sects caused no surprise in Malacca." So well supplied was this private collection of fetching young women that it became a constant scene of scandal.

When the sultan held court in the audience hall, he sat at the head of a long raised dais surrounded by heralds and warriors, awarded proximity to the royal presence by virtue of noble birth or individual prowess and deed. Here the officers of the state, dressed in long silken sarongs and shawls decorated by pins and other ornaments, sat in order of precedence. Behind them stood young nobles, selected as personal servants. A visitor fortunate enough to win an audience—a Ming or Indian trader, or Majapahit envoy—approached with many signs of deference before prostrating himself before the royal presence. Likewise, a convict seeking pardon was unceremoniously flung by guards before his despot to receive judgment: a reprieve carefully measured or dispatch to the headsman after unspeakable torture.

It was Sultan Mahmud Shah, son of Sang Purba, who descended from Mount Si-Guntang to become ruler of Malacca, who gave the remarkable Maritime Laws of Malacca, the codification of a century's customs and legal practices:

The captain is a king on board his ship, and a ship rigged and ready to sail is like a king about to leave his palace.

The changing of the watch should be witnessed by the midshipmen and announced by one beat on the drum. The man on watch is issued opium to keep him awake.

The navigator should not fail to pray to Allah and his Prophet, for he is an imam on board a ship.

Whoever uses a mirror facing toward the bow commits a serious offense, for the captain's wife or concubine might be on board. The punishment is seven lashes and a fine of 1¼ tael of gold.

Surrounded by sandy, saline soil, Malacca had no agriculture or industry to speak of, so its economy was a narrow one based on foreign commerce. Rigid customs duties, port taxes, fixed weights and measures, and coinage of tin, gold, and silver propelled daily trade, and one visitor in 1508 counted five hundred money changers on one street alone in the city. An aristocracy of wealth through trade quickly evolved.

The monsoons and trade winds permitted traders from East and West to convene in Malacca. Ships from India usually sailed in March on the northeast monsoon and returned by late summer, before the subcontinent was sealed off by the southwest winds. Likewise, the Chinese descended with the northeast trade winds early in the year, returning on the southeast monsoon in early summer. Ships from Java also made use of the southeast winds, arriving in summer and departing later in the year with the fall northwesterlies.

Extravagant and mysterious, Malacca by the beginning of the sixteenth century had drawn the world into its orbit. To the European imagination, Malacca was as bright and vivid as a bird of paradise's plumage. It was all the more exotic because, beyond its strategic location as the richest of trade emporia, little was known about it, least of all its past, a history some later said was worthy of noblest theater or grandest opera, ripe for a Shakespeare or Verdi.

IT WAS A cosmopolitan city where the East and West met half a world away from Europe, this emporium awaiting the Portuguese fleet. Now the swollen sails of caravels and junks had wound down the straits to lay to off Malacca in July 1511. The Portuguese were determined to take control of the spice trade to ensure regular shipment of the condiments and preservatives back to Lisbon, but first they had a score to settle. Magellan and Vasco da Gama had bitter memories of the Portuguese humiliation of two years before. So first they must take Malacca, then it would be a question of ending the mysterious source of spices. A window of distance was about to be shattered, never to be pieced back together. Though few realized it, an expanding world was to be set in violent motion.